Overview of Extreme Right parties in France

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An overview

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Background

The Front national (FN) was founded in 1972 but remained electorally irrelevant until the mid 80s. The impact of the party on French politics was negligible until its first success in the 1983 municipal by-election in the city of Dreux where the extreme-right list led by Jean-Pierre Stirbois gained 16.7 per cent of the vote. This performance at the local level was followed by the impressive national breakthrough of the far right in the subsequent 1984 European election, with Le Pen's party polling over 11 per cent of the votes cast.

The National Front in Elections (1983-2002).

Year	Election	%	Note
1983	Municipal by-election	16.7	Jean-Pierre Stirbois, Dreux.
1984	European	11.4	10 MEPs elected.
1986	Legislative	9.8	35 MPs.
1986	Regional	9.6	131 councillors.
1988	Presidential	14.4	First round, Le Pen.
1988	Legislative	9.7	1 MP, Yann Piat.
1989	Municipal	2.1	804 councillors.
1989	European	11.7	10 MEPs.
1989	Legislative by-election	61.3	Dreux, Marie-France Stirbois.
1992	Regional	13.6	241 councillors.
1993	Legislative	12.4	0 MP.
1994	Cantonal	10.3	4 general councillors
1994	European	10.5	11 MEPs.
1995	Presidential	15.0	First round, Le Pen.
1995	Municipal	14.2	1,249 municipal councillors
1997	Legislative	15.1	FN + other minor extreme right candidates
1998	Regional	15.1	275 councillors.
1999	European	9.1	FN=5.8 %; MNR=3.3 %
2001	Cantonal	10.2	FN=7.1 %; MNR=3.1 %
2001	Municipal	—	FN=12.2 %; MNR=11.3 %
2002	Presidential	19.2 17.8	First round, Le Pen=16.9 %; Mégret=2.3 % Second round, Le Pen=17.8 %
2002	Legislative	12.4	First round, FN=11.1 %; MNR=1.1 %; other minor extreme right candidates=0.2 %

In the 1986 and 1988 legislative elections, the FN achieved political relevance in about 90 per cent of the 555 metropolitan constituencies and gained around 10 per cent of the vote on both occasions. The 90s were to witness the stabilisation of the far right electorate. In 1993, the extreme right attracted 12.4 per cent of the legislative vote but failed to gain parliamentary representation. In the first round of the 1997 general election, the FN candidates surpassed the 10 per cent threshold in over 80 per cent of the constituencies with a total vote cast of 15 per cent. No less than 132 FN candidates went forward to the second round; they stood in 76 three-way contests in which they were opposed to the RPR/UDF and the left. In the 1998 local election, the FN won 275 seats in the regional councils under the proportional electoral rule and achieved 15 per cent in nearly half of the 96 metropolitan departments. Although the FN managed to use its blackmail potential in the election of four regional council chairmen, the party notably failed to dislodge and reshape the right-wing pole entirely by forming right / far-right coalitions at the local level.

Over the 1993-98 period, key features of mass mobilisation on the far-right have been the FN's ability to secure its electoral support between elections, and to attract significant shares of the vote among blue-collar workers and the petty bourgeoisie. The party has thus managed to broaden its electoral appeal to disillusioned voters on both sides of the political spectrum and has enjoyed exceptionally high levels of voting loyalty. One important explanation for this lies in the development among extreme right voters of a typical set of ethnocentrist and anti-system values. Arguably this has produced a significant alteration in the traditional bipolar dividing line within French politics. In many respects, the party system moved from the bipolar format towards an underlying two-and-a-half system characterised by a tripolar left-right-FN structure.

Looking at pattens of party competition and cooperation, the early 90s witnessed the end of the ‘conciliatory’ phase: the development of formal links between the mainstream right and the Front National became much less likely, as it was evident from electoral outcomes that Le Pen's party was the only beneficiary of such a strategy. After a period of uncertainty and flirtation by the RPR/UDF in the late 1980s, the FN was pushed back towards the extreme-right fringe of the political spectrum and condemned to political isolation. In the face of this strong commitment from the ruling parties of the right, the FN shifted its own position during the mid-1990s from one which favoured a broader right-wing alternative to the existing UDF/RPR coalition to one of open hostility towards the mainstream parties of the right.

In terms of party organisation, the strengths of the FN were well in evidence by the end of the 90s. Individual membership had risen from an estimated 15,000 in 1986 to 40,000. The decade witnessed the development of the basic structures and reinforcement of the entire party apparatus at both local and national levels. The internal development was associated with the founding of a large number of flanking organisations, newspapers and clubs, whose main purpose was political lobbying within specific fields of concern or particular social and professional sectors.

The 1999 Split

Despite electoral success, the Front national has suffered severely from the factionalism endemic on the extreme right since the end of WWII. Together with more than half of the party top-level elites and a sizeable segment of grassroot members, Bruno Mégret, General Delegate of the party, left the FN in January 1999 to form a rival group, the Mouvement national (MN) subsequently renamed Mouvement national républicain (MNR).

This organisational schism was largely determined by historical and tactical factors. Since its foundation in the early 70s, the Front national has been weakened by internal faction fights, and relatively unsuccessful in its attempt to bring together various opposing strains of the French far right family. In 1999 the quarrel between Le Pen and Mégret was mostly about party strategy and whether the FN should enter a process of seeking electoral alliances with the mainstream right at both the local and national levels. Whilst Le Pen strongly favoured the continuation of the 'neither left nor right' strategy suggested during the 1995 presidential campaign by the youth and the old guard within the party, Mégret and his followers advocated a more flexible approach supportive of co-operation with the RPR-UDF-DL electoral pole.

To a large extent, the parties that emerged from the 1999 split are identical to the two major groups of power-holders which traditionally competed for influence within the former FN. Most of the companions of Le Pen in today's renewed Front national belong to a well-identified faction, namely the old orthodox guard composed of the historical 'founding fathers' of the party, the neo-fascist activists who joined the FN in the late 70s, the traditionalist Catholics led by Bernard Antony, and some 'pure at heart' drawn from among the ranks of the youth organisation (FNJ), such as Carl Lang and Samuel Maréchal for instance, who rose to prominence within the national staff through a long process of internal promotion.

The group of elites that left the party with Mégret represents another very specific strand of opinions. Most of the group came to the FN in the mid 80s following Le Pen's attempt to integrate the party into moderate right political space by establishing links with the national-conservative fringe of the New Right. The MNR leadership consists predominantly of those who, like Bruno Mégret, Yvan Blot, François Bachelot and Jean-Yves Le Gallou, joined the party in 1985-86 in anticipation of the general election. In 1999, the endeavour of the former General Delegate of the FN was also supported by some of the cadres of the new generation (Philippe Colombani, Franck Timmermans, Philippe Olivier, Damien Bariller) who were eager to challenge the uncompromising party line and autocratic hegemony of Le Pen.

By 1997, important changes occurred in the balance of power within the FN national leadership. Faced with its political isolation, many in the party perceived the danger of the hard line imposed by Le Pen. At grassroots level, an increasing number of federal secretaries and local party representatives joined Mégret in his plea for an electoral cartel with the mainstream right in the forthcoming general and regional elections. By winning a significant share of the votes to the Central Committee, the *mégrétistes* emerged as an extremely influential grouping at the Xth party congress in Strasbourg in April 1997. Mégret and Le Gallou came first and second respectively ahead of Bruno Gollnisch, a result which was soon to represent a major threat to Le Pen's uncontested power.

Electoral performances since 1999

The split on the far right resulted in fierce competition between the remaining FN and the newly formed MNR in the 1999 European election fought at a national level under proportional representation. Mégret's party performed badly: by polling a mere 3.3 per cent of the vote, the Mouvement national failed to pass the five-per cent threshold of representation for the European Parliament. The Front national won 5.8 per cent of the total vote and five seats. The whole of the extreme right was clearly weakened by its internal division but had also to compete with the anti-European list headed by the very popular conservative leader of the 1992 anti-Maastricht cartel and former Minister of Interior, Charles Pasqua. The latter received 13 per cent and captured 13 seats in the election attracting a significant proportion of previous FN and RPR voters.

In March 2001, the FN and MNR fielded candidates in the joint municipal and cantonal ballots which were seen as key elections for both parties of the extreme right. In the precedent local elections, the unitary Front national had managed to establish a solid electoral base in most parts of France through a significant number of well-entrenched party activists and elected representatives in municipal and regional councils. In 1995, the FN had presented lists in 48 per cent of all metropolitan communes with more than 5,000 inhabitants; in 2001, the far right as a whole stood in less than a third (31 per cent) of those municipalities and the two parties competed against each other in 77 cities.

In 1995, the former FN received 14.2 per cent of the vote in the first round of the municipal election compared with 11.3 and 12.2 per cent for the MNR and new Front national respectively in the 2001 ballot. The two parties kept control of three out of the four cities they had won six years before in the Southern part of France – Orange (FN), Marignane and Vitrolles. They managed also to secure most of the far right electoral support in the cantonal election winning a total of 10.2 per cent of the votes (FN 7.1; MNR 3.1 per cent) as opposed to 10.3 per cent for the FN in the previous election of March 1994.

There is little doubt however that division within the extreme right camp had a major impact on the parties' ability to weigh significantly on the election outcome, particularly in the municipal contest. In most cases the FN and the MNR were not able to overcome the institutional hurdle to stand in the second round of the city council elections. In 1995 the Front national had fielded candidates in 108 of the largest urban areas in France (those with more than 30,000 inhabitants); in 2001 the comparable figure for the whole of the far right dropped down to 41 with an average loss of 2.2 per cent between the two rounds. In a significant number of municipalities, the electoral decline of the FN and MNR benefited the mainstream right, as was the case in Blois, Chartres, Evreux, Nîmes, Strasbourg and Toulon for instance.

Party Ideology

The dispute between Le Pen and Mégret was not a fight over the ideological stance of the movement, the FN being indeed largely indebted to the contribution made by Mégret to some of the most popular themes of the FN political agenda. As evidenced by the MNR manifesto *La Charte des Valeurs* publicised at the constitutive congress of the party in Marignane in January 1999, the schism had no clear implications for the ideological direction of the two resultant parties. Nor did the subsequent party literature published in 2000-01 by Mégret's movement differ significantly from the 1997 electoral platform *Le grand changement* of the former Front national.

The far right ideological corpus is primarily that of the 'conservative revolution', a concept brought to the FN by Mégret in the mid 80s. For the FN and MNR the family is the basic unit of the organically structured community. The extreme right political agenda therefore includes measures of increased social benefits in favour of large families, such as the introduction of social benefits for couples with three children or more, as well as a basic wage and pension income for housewives. The state has a role to play in the defence of traditional values to protect the moral, cultural and spiritual interests of the against drug use, homosexuality, miscegenation, the use of the morning after pill, or sex outside marriage. Both parties reject any liberalisation of the law on abortion. The far right parties demand a very large increase in police powers and call for a more repressive penal system whose central element would be the reintroduction of the death penalty.

In the 90s the French far right has somehow moved away from the traditional neo-liberal ideas that characterised the wave of popular protest on the right of the political spectrum during the 80s. Following the presidential election of 1995, the FN clearly stated that the aim of the party was to integrate the proletariat and, more generally, all the socially deprived groups into the national community by promoting new forms of solidarity. Since then the party has been willing to put more emphasis on the defence of the social rights of 'workers' and socially deprived groups by condemning the 'anonymous and vagabond capitalism of the multinational Masonic companies which want to rule the world'.

The economic nationalism of the FN and the MNR goes alongside the rejection of the European Union and the constraints imposed by the Brussels 'Eurocracy'. Both parties are fiercely opposed to EMU and target 'cosmopolitanism' and 'imperialist American culture'. At the national level, a key feature of far right strategy lies with the building of the concept of 'political establishment' and recurrent attacks on the mainstream parties, left and right alike. The far right picture of French politics is predominantly one of corruption, decay and increased party privilege. Although the parties never overtly question the legitimacy of representative democracy, it would be fair to say that anti-system attitudes promoted by the far right go far beyond simple attacks on corruption and contain some elements of a more anti-democratic programme.

Of course, both parties place a strong emphasis on immigration issues. They reject the integration of non-European foreigners, and pledge a phased return to their countries of origin. Both party manifestos threaten extreme measures against immigrants and question some of the basic rights of foreigners. The latter limitations include separate educational and social security systems, limitation on child allowances for foreign couples, and limitations on unemployment benefits. All proposals by the FN and MNR are subordinate to the principle of 'priority for French citizens' (*Préférence nationale*) which states that the French should always benefit first from the Welfare State and any other kind of civil right.

The 2002 Presidential and Legislative elections

Despite the relative decrease in electoral support for the FN at the legislative ballot, the 2002 elections have been a testament to the electoral health of the Extreme Right camp in France. In the first round of the presidential election, the Front National has reached its electoral apex by polling 16.9 per cent of the total vote, which allowed its leader to stand in the second round against the outgoing President Jacques Chirac. Together with Mégret's score of 2.3 per cent, the combined total for the far right added up to 19.2 per cent.

In the second round of the presidential ballot, Le Pen secured 17.8 per cent of the vote (around 5.5 million votes), far less than the 30 per cent he predicted for himself in the aftermath of the April 21st political earthquake but still a significant score in the context of popular mobilisation against the Extreme Right.

The legislative elections of June indicated some limits to the influence of the FN and a substantial drop in the electoral support for Le Pen's party when compared with the outcome of the 1997 election. In the first round, the FN candidates won only 11.12 per cent of the vote (as opposed to 14.9 per cent in 1997), the MNR polling a mere 1.1 per cent. Unlike 1997, the Front National could only progress to the second round in 37 metropolitan constituencies (against 132 in 1997) and captured no seats.

Looking at the main issues for the FN electorate reveals a triptych very similar to that recurrently at stake in the history of the Extreme Right at the polls since the breakthrough of the 1984 European election. In 2002, Le Pen’s first round voters expressed once again as motivating factors for their vote worries about insecurity (74 per cent), immigration (60 per cent) and unemployment (31 per cent). Essential to the understanding of the electoral dynamics of the FN in the presidential ballot is that the 'criminality' issue topped the political, public and media agenda, with nearly 6 out of 10 voters (58 per cent) ranking 'insecurity' first on their personal scale of concern, far ahead of 'unemployment' (38 per cent) and 'poverty' (31 per cent) (Source: IPSOS – Vizzavi-Le Figaro-France 2, 12 April 2002).

In 2002, the FN's electorate remains predominantly male, younger and of low education. Looking at occupation in terms of social class, it is important to note the electoral dynamics of the FN and its continuing ability to draw growing support from working-class and voters, which reinforces the more traditional petty-bourgeoisie element of the Extreme Right electorate. Again in 2002, the Front National has managed to gather together those two socially and ideologically opposed groupings: in the first round of the presidential election, Le Pen won 19 per cent of the vote among shopkeepers, craftsmen and small entrepreneurs, together with 30 per cent of the working-class vote. In the second round, the FN leader secured 31 per cent of the valid vote cast among workers and 29 per cent in the self-employed (Sources: IPSOS-Vizzavi-Le Figaro-France 2, 21 April and 5 May 2002).

Lastly, it was evident from the 2002 elections that both the FN and MNR continued to suffer from their lack of coalition potential and political isolation within the system. Despite efforts to establish links with the Moderate Right at the local level —which in the case of Le Pen's party represented incontestably a U-turn from the anti-Right strategy initiated in 1995–, neither the FN nor the MNR veritably managed to escape from the fringe of the system.

The new balance of forces between the FN and MNR

The balance of forces between the two main competitors of the Extreme Right has undergone considerable change. The presidential and legislative contests both contributed to illustrate the bitter setback of the MNR in challenging Le Pen's monopoly over far right politics in France. The share of the Extreme Right vote secured by the MNR in the presidential and legislative election represented only 11.9 and 8.9 per cent of the total vote for the far right respectively, as opposed to 36.2 per cent in the June 1999 European election. At the 2002 presidential ballot, Mégret secured his best scores almost exclusively in his three departmental strongholds of Bouches-du-Rhône, Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin, where he won over 4 per cent of the vote. Only in Vitrolles did the MNR leader surpass the 10 per cent threshold (with 11.5 % of the valid vote cast in the XIIth constituency of Bouches-du-Rhône) without being able however to move forward to the second round.

A similar picture emerged from the legislative election: the party's best results were concentrated in a tiny number of constituencies, with only 14 cases of MNR candidates polling over 4 per cent of the vote. The figureheads of the party failed to progress to the second round: Jean-Yves Le Gallou received only 4.1 per cent of the vote in Gennevilliers, Damien Bariller won less than 4 per cent in Gardanne and Bruno Mégret attracted a mere 18.6 per cent of the vote in Vitrolles (as opposed to 35.5 per cent in the first round of the 1997 legislative election).

The severe electoral setback of the MNR at the 2002 elections raises doubts about the future of mégrétisme as a distinctive political current within the party system, located somewhere between the mainstream Right and a more radical option embodied by the FN. Not only does the MNR suffer from the dramatic drop in its electoral support and the likelihood of a proportion of its members and sympathisers returning to a more successful FN but also the party has to take the financial consequences of its electoral failure and the cost of two expensive national campaigns in the absence of future State funding.

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